Transcript: Tanna Hall

Save Your Oakland Stories

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IMAGES:

INTERVIEWER (Elena Botkin-Levy)
All right, so today is October 14th, 2023. We are recording at the Oakland Main Library for Savior Oakland Stories. I'm Elena Botkin Levy from Gems Oral Histories. And I'm recording with Tanna Hall today. So I'm going to have you introduce yourself, your name, your age, and when and where you were born.

TANNA HALL
My name is Tanna Simone Hall. I'm 41. I'll be 42 at the end of this month. I was born in San Francisco, CA and raised in Oakland, CA.

INTERVIEWER
Cool. So tell me about your relationship to Oakland.

TANNA HALL
My relationship to Oakland has meant everything to me. I'm biracial, I'm gay, and I feel like Oakland is a great place to be for both of those things. I used to call it my country because I identify with this place more than, more than the other places in the state or country. I have an Oakland tattoo and I have extreme pride for Oakland. I cling to it for lots of my identity.

INTERVIEWER
So what was it like growing up and… or when did you first come to Oakland? And talk about that time?

TANNA HALL
I came to Oakland when I was nine months old, but my earliest memories are probably around 3 or 4. At the time I lived in North Oakland, right across from the MacArthur Bart station near 40th and Telegraph, and my earliest memories were of the strip mall shopping center being built on the corner and riding my bike between our boundaries under the… over to the edge of the overpass where BART and the 980 freeway was, to the corner of 40th and Telegraph.

INTERVIEWER
Nice. And you'd ride bikes and do what else?

TANNA HALL
We would just ride back and forth because that was our boundary. It was a really busy four lane St. It was just my brother and myself. He would break the rules a little bit and jump his bike off the stairs that they were building into the little strip mall and that and the driveway was my main life. We lived in a sixplex, I believe, and a lot of our neighbors were Vietnamese and or Chinese immigrants. And so I remember learning certain gardening techniques from my neighbor Hans. And I remember learning to jump rope in the driveway, ride my bike and just kind of be free. We grew up on public transportation as well, so that was a main thoroughfare for riding. I remember the sound of buses. I remember there being a lot of delicatessens. There was still a lot more Italian influence in the neighborhood. And yeah, that was my small but fun world.

INTERVIEWER
What kind of gardening did you do? Or what were you growing?

TANNA HALL
Well, he was growing all sorts of stuff. I remember he grew sunflowers, really tall and heavy. They filled with seeds and he said each one was for each member of my family, my mom, myself and my brother. I remember learning how to kill snails, unfortunately, with salt from him. And I am sure he grew vegetables of some sort. But I just remember the sunflowers most of all.

INTERVIEWER
Those poor snails.

TANNA HALL
Yes.

INTERVIEWER
Where did you go to elementary school?

TANNA HALL
I went to Sequoia Elementary School. I went to the Piedmont Child Development Center for a lot of my youth. We used to go from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM. We'd get up in the dark, catch the bus, get dropped off. My mom was a student at Mills, so I remember having breakfast, spending the whole day at the Piedmont CDC Child Development Center near what might become the library behind Piedmont Avenue Elementary. I went to kindergarten there. I left for a little bit to Union City. I returned and went to Sequoia Elementary where I now currently work.

INTERVIEWER
What do you do there?

TANNA HALL
I'm what's called a culture keeper. So they funded a position for me to kind of maintain school values, uphold morale of staff and students, and help with, like, social emotional stuff, conflict resolution, de-escalation, and help support kids to stay in classrooms and be successful.

INTERVIEWER
Does being in that space where you went to elementary school bring back memories?

TANNA HALL
It does. It brings back memories and it's interesting to be there now, but it's also really helpful to build rapport with students. And Oakland has always meant community to me. It's called “the Town” for a

reason, and I feel like a school is a small mini, it is a small mini community, a microcosm. So it brings back memories and it just, it's a joyful place to be.

INTERVIEWER
What do you remember?

TANNA HALL
Well, I tell the kids this story because it's funny, because I'm there to kind of help uphold rules and behavior, and we're honest, respectful, compassionate students, responsible. But I was a part of two clubs. One called Uneird (Unique and Weird) that I made with a friend of mine, and the other was called The Far Side that I was asked to join by two other friends. And what we would do was sometimes mischievous, such as we wanted recess we don't want to have to come back in from recess. So a friend of mine brought some clear super glue and was going to put it in the keyhole of the doorknob so that the teacher wouldn't be able to unlock it. And then we thought we'd be able to stay outside at recess forever, which unfortunately, the teacher was able to put the key in the hole and we had to go back to class. But I remember that, hanging around playing football, Chinese jump rope. I made some really good friends. I'd ride my bike to school, and on rainy days I would save worms from puddles along the way.

INTERVIEWER
What would you do with the worms?

TANNA HALL
I would scoop them with a stick and then I would set them into a safer place that wasn't wet or not as wet, and just hope that they lived.

INTERVIEWER
Amazing

TANNA HALL
Yes.

INTERVIEWER
And then what about for junior high?

TANNA HALL
I went to Bret Harte Junior High School.

INTERVIEWER
What was that like?

TANNA HALL

That was intense. That was where life changed a lot. I think in Oakland, students really sift. If they're going to go to private school, they might go then. It was the 90s. I was just telling some folks downstairs that I remember OJ Simpson, Rodney King verdicts coming out. I remember OJ Simpson - people busted out of the classroom, ran all around the yard in celebration. And it was… there were a lot of race riots, in their own way, in the school. There was a week where Asian students didn't come to school because they were being hit and attacked in the hallways constantly, you know, punched, slammed in lockers. And my group was really diverse. It was me, the handful of white kids in the school, a lot of first generation, like Chinese American, Filipino American, African, like, Nigerian American, myself who's biracial, Black and white. And we were this like hodgepodge mixed group that stayed in the middle of the school away from a lot of people. But I remember it being pretty violent in many ways. And my brother pointed out later that we were a generation that grew up with crack, what they called crack babies. But really, he had pointed out too that it's not like, oh, some babies are born addicted to crack. It's that children are growing up in homes of extreme neglect, poverty, and abuse. And so I think growing up in Oakland in the 80s and 90s, I graduated 99, I think there was a lot of intense stuff going. If you tried to go buy your lunch, like say buy French fries (which, they had terrible options to offer), but you could maybe not get out of the line without people reaching and grabbing your French fries directly, taking your whole thing, eating some of your food, taking your money for it. So I think there was a mixture of students from, but it was more segregated in junior high school. So I remember that being kind of where you… I had to quiet down a little. I just, I just shut up mostly and, like, laid low. But I always played sports so that kept me out of most drama.

INTERVIEWER
What kind of sports did you play?

TANNA HALL
I played volleyball, soccer, softball, and swimming. Everything but basketball, unfortunately.

INTERVIEWER
Why not basketball?

TANNA HALL
You know, I don't know why. My brother played and I learned to shoot from him. And we lived behind Bret Harte, so I would climb the fence. I would almost always be one of the last people there and we would climb the fence and go play there at the off days. And I would always help shag the ball while he shot. But I just, I never, I never played for a team. I'm not sure. It just, I didn't play in junior high and I didn't play beyond. So I fell in love with volleyball as soon as I started, as soon as I learned it, which was 7th grade. And then I committed to that pretty hardcore throughout.

INTERVIEWER
You said junior high was when you really changed. What did that mean for you? What did that look like? And then what happened in high school?

TANNA HALL
I think in elementary school, how I said I was in Club Uneird… I think two things. I think I didn't notice race as much. Or people, you know, weren't dating. It was more low key and I think I bonded with people over my creative tendencies, etc. But I feel like in junior high what changed is… well, one my brother got jumped going there and he saw a lot of violence too. He was a year ahead of me, so he kind of warned me in advance. But I think my safety felt compromised as soon as I hit junior high. I think there was a lot more groping in the hallways, teachers not out during passing periods. We had Subs. I remember we had a sub come in with a robe. One guy, Mr. Salamac, the resource teacher who ended up going to Montera and moving into administration was the only one who seemed to really care in regards to, he came out with a megaphone. He established authority, if you will. And so I think what changed is I didn't, I didn't act as as free spirited because I didn't want, I didn't want to stand out, whereas I had identified as unique and weird or I have, you know, very expressive in my look. In junior high was when I slicked my hair back in a bun, wore whatever was on trend and tried to just remain unnoticed. High school was a little bit better because it was people coming from all different schools. And I think developmentally kids were a little bit more relaxed. So you… and I was at Skyline, which was more of a spread out campus. And so there were ways in which you could move and be yourself, and it wasn't an issue to other people.

INTERVIEWER
What bus would you ride to Skyline?

TANNA HALL
I actually would ride with various friends. I got rides. I rode first with my brother's friends and then some of my friends started getting their licenses. So I didn't. Sometimes I did ride. I think it was the 652? I remember riding back was… oh I do have one story… Riding back from Skyline one day on the bus, I remember the bus driver was done. And I can feel for her now. She was on a double bus full of high school students, aggravated, and she thought someone was smoking weed in the back of the bus. So she pulled over and everyone was like, “no, no one's doing that” and she just decided she wasn't going to stop at anyone’s stop. I think that had been her final straw. I don't know what the day was, but she just sped down the hill. Everyone was dinging the bell for our stops, “ding, ding, ding, ding, ding.” And she just kept going and she pulled directly down by Fruitvale and MacArthur in front of what's now CVS and Farmer Joe's and was like “everybody get off” and we got off. So I rode it occasionally, but mostly I got rides.

INTERVIEWER
It's amazing. Makes sense you can feel for her now.

TANNA HALL
Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER
I wonder… you've lived here all your life and so how, what kind of observations do you have about the city changing from all of these stories you're telling from being young?

TANNA HALL

The city has changed a lot in the past. I'll just say that I remember three and a half decades because, even though I've been here for four. I feel like Oakland when it was the town I used to… where… I've worked at Laurel Bookstore, all these different… Cafe Diem, local coffee shops and bookstores, businesses. There was a time when I would always see people. I couldn't stand on the corner without someone saying hello. It was almost like deja vu or Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood in certain ways where you knew you'd see certain people at the same times. And, but… and having moved away to college briefly, even though I came back to SF State, was you didn't know who you would see where. Oakland was so diverse all along. It was technically a chocolate city which means it was most… it felt like there was a large… there was a large Black population. And looking at statistics I don't think it was "mostly" but it was definitely a lot, and a lot of immigrants we had... my junior high was like Laotian, Cambodian, Pacific Islander, Black, Latino, all that. And I feel like the… and white. But it was like the people who were here agreed to be here, and were here just because of what it was. And I think that when it became… over the years it's become sought after and desirable for all the reasons that people know it's amazing. The lake, the hills, the hiking, the… all these things. But it definitely… you never knew who you'd see anywhere like who the postal worker was going to be. It felt like any person of any color could have any rank. And what I also noticed is students. If you didn't have stable housing then let's say you lived in a family that rented, you might lose your housing or move. But you'd move apartment to apartment, but you stayed within Oakland.

Now seeing as it, you know, working in schools, I see students who if they get kicked out they're in Fresno, Stockton or one parent's there. Antioch, Sac, Pittsburg. So I think that Oakland's gotten infiltrated - I call them space invaders – by people who didn't bring anything. Like there used to be restaurants, it'd be a Asian restaurant or this or that'd have a name and then everything turned to the laundromat. All the clubs closed, they stopped playing music, and they put beer and bocce ball and named things in generic, general, pun-intended type of ways. And I feel like the more people pay to live here, the more they expect it to mirror what it is that they want. And the spirit of Oakland is "it is what it is and bring what you can." So I think now people are coming with kids and families, which is even weirder. But with the whole tech boom, it brought individuals, single individuals who were looking for what they could gain, not what they could offer. So it's changed in a way that I don't enjoy. Because I feel like, just like if you take a new job, you should ask what's been going on, what's working, what's not, instead of implementing your ideas. I feel like some of the people who are coming here aren't asking. They'll walk down the street as though they're discovering. "I wonder what this is. I wonder…" Well, ask. There's people who've been here. So. And that's the part where I can come up with a story. I could go on and on. I'll just say in closing, the Lake is an example to me. Like I remember when Festival at the Lake got shut down. I remember the police brutality. I remember them discouraging cruising. I remember that you couldn't have open containers, couldn't have dogs, like "not allowed, not allowed, not allowed." And then, you know, I saw Dolores Park, then I went to the Lake and it was like open containers, bike lanes, you know, all of these things. And it's like, what are, what are these things for? How are our lives now valued? What's the difference between someone on their bike and a cyclist? So Oakland has changed

somewhat, although it's hard to really kill its vibe. It's in danger of changing into a place that's not authentic or welcoming to all.

INTERVIEWER
Having spent so much of your life here, and it sounds like you've worked at a lot of, like, the bookstore, you're naming a lot of locations, I wonder if there's one location that you want to call out as being really significant to you or having a particular memory or story related to it.

TANNA HALL
Perfect. I got you. Oakland Parks and Recreation. I was a junior lifeguard from 12 years old and became a lifeguard at 16. I worked at a lot of pools, but I predominantly worked at Fremont Pool on Foothill and like 46th, across from the high school. That was a wonderful place to work because it was like having a summer camp in Oakland. We'd have late night pool parties. Even the managers would throw them. We'd leave the chain link, the lock, the padlock, you know, open but looking like it was linked. And then everyone would know where the party was and like once probably a week, or every two weeks or a month, we partied at every pool. Castlemont, Defremery, Lions on the late night. Watermelons full of alcohol. Everybody would come. It was just so fun. And so there was a way to bond with lots of people during that. And then my memory from that was that's where I segued a lot of my jobs. That's how I got into schools. I ended up in the Fire Department for years as well in San Francisco. But having tried to get in Oakland Fire. And my memories are those parties.

And I think, yeah, and a hit and run accident that happened my rookie season as a lifeguard. We were walking to what used to be Safeway, but it's now like Mi Tierra or Mi Pueblo, a super Mercado. And a kid had been riding his bike. We heard a screech and a peel out. And it was me and the other rookie guard. And it, I think it was 46th, I'm not sure, or 45th. And basically we look up and we saw a kid. We saw a bike in between what could have been a crosswalk and then a body maybe 20 feet or so away from the bike. And I remember this spilled milk. He was riding… there was jugs, you could tell he was, like, balancing family style groceries on his bike. And he had been hit and he was screaming and this deep guttural sound that I'll never forget. And his friend was with him and he spoke only Spanish. And so we had to block the, you know try and keep anyone from driving down the street, and support, you know, his head from moving. And it… he was… his head was kind of like flapping a little bit like on the back like… he had a… he wasn't wearing a helmet. And the fire department came and I remember 1. he spoke Spanish, but… and 2. I could tell he was like doing non-kid duties by the amount of groceries he was bringing back. And then 3. they cut his clothes. You have to strip and flip and just, you know, to not move the patient as much or damage your spine. And I remember he had really dirty underwear. And I remember that because I remember just really thinking, like, what is this child's story? First he was hit, but second, like, what has his life been like in that short amount of time? So I'm hopeful and I think that he probably made it, but that was one of my early memories in my job there.

INTERVIEWER
Lastly…

TANNA HALL
Yes.

INTERVIEWER
If someone visits you that isn't from Oakland, where do you take them?

TANNA HALL
I immediately take them up to the hills usually by Merritt College along the view that… by the parking lot across from it. I show them the topography so they can see where the city is, Alameda. So there. I take them up to a view. And then I take them to the cemetery, Mountain View Cemetery, which I think is beautiful and also has an amazing view. And yeah, then I'll take them around, you know, at somewhere in the… to hike. Usually to Jack London. And depending on what, like, they like to eat, a multitude of places. But I start with view.

INTERVIEWER
Nice. This is the smallest snapshot of your Oakland story, so I wonder if in this time anything feels like it's missing that you wanna make sure to record.

TANNA HALL
I'll say that Lake Merritt is Oakland's jewel, and it's a sacred space where all people can go at any time for reflection. It's a place where I learned, you know, to ride my bike. It's a place that I just talked about, with cruising and the Festival at the Lake. And it's a place where I feel like a lot of my memories are layered. It's where the memorial to the Ghost Ship warehouse fire was. It's where people walk to celebrate. It's where people go to mourn. There was a time when I hated that tents were being… even though it's become, you know, tent city in lots of places… I couldn't believe that there were tents at the lake because I even felt like, and this is going to sound awful, like it doesn't matter what the conditions are, homes are not allowed to be built there for a reason and people can go there. But it's like a waterfront property that I didn't think people should be able to live. I know that sounds awful, but I just feel like something's got to be sacred. And when I saw so many… it was just all in your face. You know, there were always homeless people at certain benches and under the pergola, but when it just was like an entire city under the bridge, and people there, that was intense. Until, recently I found out a good friend from high school lives in one of those tents and I hung out with her and dropped her off. And she grew up right down the street. And so it has a different meaning to me. And I've, you know, grown to understand the severity of the situation and the magnitude of it all. But I'll just say that Lake Merritt is special because anyone can go there for any reason. And it often delivers, including the Warriors Day Parade, which was one of the best experiences that I've had there. So that's what I'd like to add.

INTERVIEWER
Cool. Thank you.

TANNA HALL
Thank you.